

PARTY FEELING IN 1796 AND 1896.

TOWNSEND PRIZE ORATION.*

De Toqueville has defined party association as the inalienable right of men to advance or defend their political beliefs. Political parties have arisen as the means of enforcing independent thought. In all free governments, dating from the Athenian and Roman Republics the popular will has been expressed by party action. In America the spirit of party is the motive power of the machinery of government. Bold and resourceful it has moulded in no small degree the construction of the Constitution and influenced the development of our legal institutions.

Washington's endeavor was to consider the nation as a single party and thereby prevent discord and jealousy. But the adoption of the Constitution disclosed an opposition between national and state sovereignty; a tendency toward a strong centralized government and a conflicting tendency to maintain the majesty of the communities. This contest, which for years has overshadowed all others in our history, was not confined to the interpretation of the Constitution, but affected current legislation and foreign policy. When Hamilton sought to establish a national credit by his system of assumption, he was met with protests that his measures infringed the sovereignty of the States. Because they believed the Union was becoming too strong, the opponents of centralization opposed the founding of a National Bank and the enforcement of the Excise Tax.

A question of foreign politics was destined to arouse the clashing elements to organized action and separate the people into distinct political parties. The enthusiasm which welcomed the supposed advent of French Liberty had been widespread. But when the Revolutionists mistook License for Liberty, when they abandoned all principles of Justice and Humanity and would entangle us in a foreign war, a wave of reaction turned sympathy into disgust. The "bloody work of redemption" did not lessen the enthusiasm of those whose cry had been "Popular Liberty," who had formed Jacobin Clubs and deified Robes-

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pierre and Danton. Moreover, England's hostile action upon the frontier, her restrictions upon our trade, incurred popular hatred and increased the sympathy for France.

When Washington declared a policy of neutrality, party lines were drawn. The spirit of opposition crystallized in organization. Jefferson founded the Republican party whose policy was to protect the rights of the States, aid France and oppose the Federal Administration. The Agricultural interests of the South were arrayed against the Commercialism of the North. The popular sympathy for the Atheism and Anarchy of the French Revolution was resisted by the unbending Puritanism of New England.

In the ensuing campaign of 1796, partisanship spread among the people and infected Congressional legislation. In the debates upon the Jay Treaty the Republicans charged the Administration with betrayal of American liberties to British interests. It was retorted that the Republicans were lead by French agents and were seeking the national destruction in a war with England. By a close party vote the treaty was ratified and a probable war averted. Canvassing continued to the meeting of the electors. Persons and principles were assailed with equal acrimony. Adams was described as a champion of ranks and titles and kings. Jefferson was denounced as a traitor who had encouraged the French agents to insult the President and defy the laws. The clergy warned the people against the Republican tendencies towards Atheism and Jacobinism. Secret political clubs were formed for the purpose of inventing and circulating party scandal and creating disorder. Not even Washington was spared. The Republican press published him as "Debaucher of his Nation's Liberties," and Congress insulted him at the delivery of his annual message. The most menacing feature was the existence and approval of foreign intrigue. Adet, the French Minister, attempted to win votes for Jefferson by picturing the horrors of a war with France and then announcing that his country would cease diplomatic relations until the result of the election was known.

Saddened by this apparent forgetfulness of the nation, Washington arose to stay this party zeal. Bidding his country farewell, he exclaimed, "I solemnly warn you against the baneful effects of party strife. It is a fire not to be quenched and demands vigilance to prevent its bursting forth in consuming fury."

It is almost incredible that this infant nation, exhausted by a seven years' war, its government barely established and its very

existence threatened by two powerful nations, should have divided itself into hostile factions; that party spirit should have weakened the administration of the government and obstructed the development of a national life. This intensity of party feeling was of great significance. Its explanation is only to be found in a consideration of the economic condition of America and of the political philosophy of the times. The Reformation had revolutionized the accepted theory of the antecedent state of man by substituting freedom for slavery. All Europe was shaken with the strife between the Divine Right of Kings and the Divine Right of the People. Its culmination was the French Revolution. Under such conditions America was colonized. The philosophy of toleration was the mental outfit of the colonists and America was a fertile soil to sow the doctrines of Milton and Locke. Democracy was a physical and economic result. Unlimited land abolished such distinctions as landlord and tenant. There was but one class. Equality of property, equality of family, equality of labor—these were the elements that made America an ideal democracy. Liberty was enjoyed to its utmost limit. The colonists were free from religious restraint from the fear of strong neighbors, from the warring of classes.

With the development of the country such an ideal state could not continue. As population grew the amount of free land was reduced and rents were increased. There was no longer equality of property and labor. Society became more complicated. The antagonism between equality and liberty was evident. By this social differentiation the American democracy was first tested. The conflicts between the opposing interests caused the fundamental divisions of the political parties of 1796. The issue was between Liberty and Order. Fresh in the minds of the people was the liberation of England by Hampden and Cromwell, the colonial defiance of the mother country and the fierce struggle for independence. Inspired by such thoughts it was but natural that the common people should embrace the extreme principles of liberty, sympathize with France and identify themselves with the party of Jefferson. In the refusal of the Administration to aid France they saw a surrender of their rights to English interests. Accustomed to the maximum of liberty they opposed the centralization of government as an eventual restriction upon their individual freedom.

What has been called the natural aristocracy of America abhorred these ultra-democratic views. They had acquired

wealth, education and power. The French Revolution had taught them that absolute equality and absolute liberty meant division of wealth and insecurity of life and property. The landed proprietors had no desire to ruin their fortunes in a war with England. Their influence was for a strong national government, that laws might be enforced, property protected and trade developed. It was also a consequence that the men of culture and refinement who had raised themselves above the common level should distrust the infallibility of the multitude and the theory of unlimited government by the people.

The Republicans believed in the final wisdom of the people, in leaving things to their natural course. The Federalists insisted upon the maintenance of Order and the respect for Authority.

While the issues of this first act in the drama of American politics have long since been extinct, the tendencies then set in motion have influenced all subsequent legislation. They serve as chains in the transition of parties. They bind the Republican party of 1796 to the Democratic party of to-day, the Federalist to the modern Republican party.

The development of party spirit may best be studied by a consideration of our present political situation. It would be a difficult task to distinguish the respective principles and doctrines of our two great political parties. Both have histories; both have leaders and war cries. Yet what principles of governmental policy divide them? Their positions upon questions of Free Trade and Protection are merely relative. Reform in the Civil Service receives the support of the best men in either party. Each faction acting upon similar principles has made similar successes and blunders in financial legislation and foreign policy.

Our parties exist because the events of 1796 endowed their predecessors with the sinews of party loyalty and party discipline. Their spirit has become effective through far-reaching and powerful organization. The power of control is centered in a select few who frame all political issues, declare all party policies, name all candidates. The frequency of elections, the increase of ignorant voters, the ease of naturalization, are all forces which increase the power and importance of these expert politicians. The vital policies of the past have been realized or abandoned.

The object of parties of to-day is their own existence and for that reason modern legislation has been partisan in the extreme.

Territories have been admitted to statehood, not because of their fitness but to strengthen the power of the dominant party. The extravagant granting of pensions is an instance of party popularity at the expense of the public treasury. Foreign affairs are discussed in a warlike tone in order to win the patriotic approval of the people. The gross corruption and inefficiency which investigation has revealed in the affairs of our cities are but the results of the extension of party government to municipalities.

It is not intended to condemn political parties or disparage their existence. Our form of government demands their continuance. Their evils arise when they are controlled by men whose title to authority is neither character nor statesmanship; when party action is but the impulse of popular prejudice.

What issues the impending presidential campaign will produce it is impossible to predict. The hardships and distress of the past few years have brought into prominence certain tendencies which are most harmful to our institutions. Not the least dangerous has been the growth of Sectionalism. It was upon this principle that the members from the Silver States obstructed all legislations, although they might ruin a nation already staggering with financial disaster. The present tariff bill involving the gravest principles of economic policy was the result of efforts to secure selfish ends, regardless of the welfare of the whole people,

The election of Populist Governors in our Southern and Western States, the popularity of schemes for fiat money, Government control of railways, are all indications of the communistic belief that the State can create wealth and regulate prosperity.

Of still graver importance is the vague desire for unregulated liberty which was expressed in the sympathy among the laboring class for the Homestead rioters and their resentment of Federal interference in the Chicago strike. These signs of discontent present real dangers which sometime must be met. Should they assume the character of political issues, the intensity of party feeling would surpass that of 1796. What was then a struggle of political equality would now become a struggle of industrial equality. The forces of Order would again oppose those of Liberty although Liberty might approach Anarchy.

The manifestations of party feeling of these two eras, has lead to the conclusion that the parties of 1796 were more truly great. They were impelled by principles rather than by their consequences. They were distinguished by higher motives and broader doctrines. Their action was more sincere and resolute. Their aim was not mere office. "Bosses" would not have been

tolerated nor would they have peaceably submitted to a "machine." Yet they were but parties. Like those of to-day they had their passions and hatreds and greed. They weakened the Government at a critical point and laid it open to foreign intrigue and corruption. The comparison teaches us that the evils of party spirit arise when it prevents the growth of an honest public sentiment, when the integrity of the state is impaired, when public policies are considered not in the "light of truth but for the agitation of the people," when party is elevated above country.

The great significance of the comparison is brought home to us by the fact that while the tendencies and principles and issues of 1796 are dead the spirit of party remains. The lesson is that whether the motive is principle or patronage, parties should be considered as the agents of public opinion. When they extend beyond this sphere, lose their animating principles, and exist for their own welfare, party loyalty is at the expense of public interest. There is no magic in the words Republican and Democrat. When parties outlive their usefulness, it is time for the intelligence of the community to sacrifice party allegiance, break party shackles, and promote good government by independent action.

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